ORIGIN/ACTION

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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FROM : AmEmbassy ATHENS

DATE: December 13, 1963

SUBJECT : The Greek Political Scene Following the Caramanlis Departure

REF :

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
REVIEWED BY [illegible] DATE 6 MAY 1982
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PA or FOI EXEMPTIONS

Now that the initial surprise over the sudden departure of former Prime Minister Constantinos Caramanlis has subsided somewhat, political observers are turning their attention to the effects of the Caramanlis step on the Greek political scene. Political speculation is now centering on three questions: (a) what effect the departure will have on the prospects for early elections, (b) how the new situation affects the internal policy of the Center Union, and most importantly, the role of Sophocles Venizelos, and (c) what will be the long-term impact on the ERE party.

The initial reaction of most political observers to the question of early elections is that they are somewhat less probable than they were before Caramanlis made his portentous decision to quit Greek politics. The reason is clear: without Caramanlis' strong hand to keep them in line, those deputies who feel their seats could be lost in new elections might well desert ERE and join the Center Union. This would provide Papandreou with the nationalist majority he needs (in addition to the EDA votes of which he is already assured) and thus eliminate the need for elections. These defectors from ERE might join the Center Union individually or come en bloc with a leader, to simply "cooperate" with the Center Union. Another possible means of avoiding elections would be for the entire ERE to give Papandreou a vote of confidence when Parliament meets next week, and such a possibility was suggested by the conservative Kathimerini in its December 11 edition.

GROUP 4

Declassified 12 years after date of origin.

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On the other hand, according to sources close to the Center Union Leader, Papandreou is more determined than ever to have early elections. With the departure of Caramanlis, who dominated Greek political life for eight years, Papandreou would appear to be unchallenged by any other figure outside his party as the principal figure on the political scene. Further, without the presence of Caramanlis to give the party a boost, ERE would probably fare considerably less well at the polls then in the recent elections. Therefore, Papandreou believes the ideal time for elections is now, and the sooner the better.

At this point, of course, the role of the King becomes crucial. Recent reports emanating from the Palace indicate that the King, and his advisers, are opposed to new elections. Unquestionably, the Palace would prefer some other solution than elections which would see a strengthened Papandreou returned to office. Therefore the King will probably try every other possible solution before agreeing to elections. On the other hand, according to a source close to Papandreou, the Center Union Leader has warned the King — through the Crown Prince — that any attempt to delay elections will be considered an attempt to undermine the Center Union. And in his conversations, Papandreou has coupled this warning with veiled threats that he will call out his followers to the Athens squares if the King does act against him.

Concerning the internal policy of the Center Union, the Caramanlis departure somewhat paradoxically strengthens Deputy Prime Minister Venizelos' hand at the same time it leaves Papandreou the current dominant figure on the political scene. One of the stumbling blocks to Venizelos defecting from the Center Union and taking with him his following to form a coalition with someone from ERE (or the right generally) has been the presence of Caramanlis at the head of the ERE party. The Center Union fire has always been concentrated on Caramanlis, and for any Center Union figure to join forces with the "hated enemy" would have seemed like a betrayal of the Center cause. Now, however, with Caramanlis out of the way, Venizelos might find a union with some other ERE figure more palatable for his followers.

Thus the Caramanlis departure throws Venizelos into the limelight and political observers are speculating about what his next move will be. According to reports, Venizelos has repeatedly said to confidants that he could not bolt the Center Union so soon after elections which constituted a personal victory for Papandreou. Now, however, he may reconsider this decision. Papandreou, for his part, will be keeping a wary eye on Venizelos' movements at the same time he steps up pressure for elections. In the view of Papandreou supporters, an overwhelming victory for the Center Union in new elections would strengthen Papandreou's position to the point where he would no longer have to fear [redacted] his traditional party rival.

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With regard to the future of ERE, it seems clear that at least in the immediate future, the party will be weaker with the loss of its energetic leader. As mentioned earlier, pressure will be great for those deputies who fear elections to bolt the party. Further, while the party for the moment is rallying around Canellopoulos, it is probable that eventually a real struggle for leadership may develop among those figures in ERE who feel themselves the logical heir apparent to Caramanlis. ERE is amply blessed with persons who have demonstrated leadership capacity, and it is unlikely they will be content to remain indefinitely in the background.

With the departure of Caramanlis, the names of two men not serving in the current Parliament are again being frequently mentioned as possible leaders of a future conservative party. They are Spyros Markezinis, Leader of the Progressive Party, and Air Vice Marshal (Retired) Haralambos Potamianos. According to these reports, Markezinis might possibly emerge as a compromise leader for ERE, while Potamianos is frequently mentioned as the organizer of a new, conservative political movement, which reportedly would have the backing of the King.

For the moment, however, the chief interest of political observers is concentrated on what will happen when Parliament convenes December 16 and a vote of confidence is held a few days later. The answer to the political questions posed in the first paragraph might well become clear at that point.

For the Ambassador:

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